

Overwhelmed

by Sam Fein | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT The isolation, stress, and uncertainty fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged our collective mental health. For people with preexisting psychiatric disabilities, these repercussions are further magnified. This is particularly true for individuals who have experienced involuntary confinement in "corrective" facilities. For survivors of institutional abuse, the gross restriction of movement generated by the quarantine and lockdowns replicates the systems of total control to which they have previously been subjected. Facing an uncertain future and lacking access to community support systems, many survivors have been forced to improvise mechanisms to relieve traumatic symptoms on their own. While these self-soothing mechanisms can provide relief during moments of acute distress, they may be ultimately destructive and exacerbate long-term symptomatology. This artwork is an expression of overwhelm and the conundrum faced when survival strategies that meet immediate needs threaten long-term well-being.

KEYWORDS COVID-19, mental health, institutional abuse, psychiatric disability

"This mind isn't mine, who am I to judge? / Oh, I should be fine, but it's all too much"

–Royal and the Serpent



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/5_Overwhelmed-Sam-Fein.jpg >

Sam Fein
Overwhelmed, 2021
Gouache, ink, and pencil on paper
15.5 x 19.5 in

Description

Note: Elements of this artwork are intended to be ambiguous and subject to interpretation by the viewer. I have used asterisks (*) to indicate these points of ambiguity and slashes to indicate when there can be multiple interpretations of an object in the composition.

An androgynous figure* is in a dark room, backlit by the neon yellow light of a nearby TV screen. The figure is bathed in shades of blue and wears large eyeglasses and a torn t-shirt. There is a lit joint/rolled cigarette* hanging out of their open mouth. The figure appears bewildered as a group of translucent ghosts flies towards them. In front of the figure is a disarray of items: a half-eaten donut and pizza slice, a turned-over container of melted ice cream, a microphone/back massager/sex toy*, a liquor bottle, and a margarita glass with a lime on the rim. In the right-hand corner is an ashtray littered with stubbed-out cigarettes, joints, and a roach clip.

Behind the figure there is an old box-style TV with a staticky screen. The TV screen displays four cartoon joints interacting with one another. It is not exactly clear what the joints are doing, although it appears one joint is holding and strangling another*. A fifth cartoon joint appears tied up on the floor in front of the others*.

The majority of the scene is engulfed in layers of black ink and indigo gouache. A neon yellow glow emanates from the TV, casting highlights on the figure and items in the foreground. Bold pencil strokes are used to create shadows, patterns, and other details. The repeated layering of paint washes and pencil strokes produces an overall gritty texture on the composition.

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Sam Fein is an independent artist, curator, educator, and community organizer working to build collective power with survivors of institutional abuse.

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Article details

Sam Fein, "Overwhelmed," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.2.19>

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ISSN 2469-4053